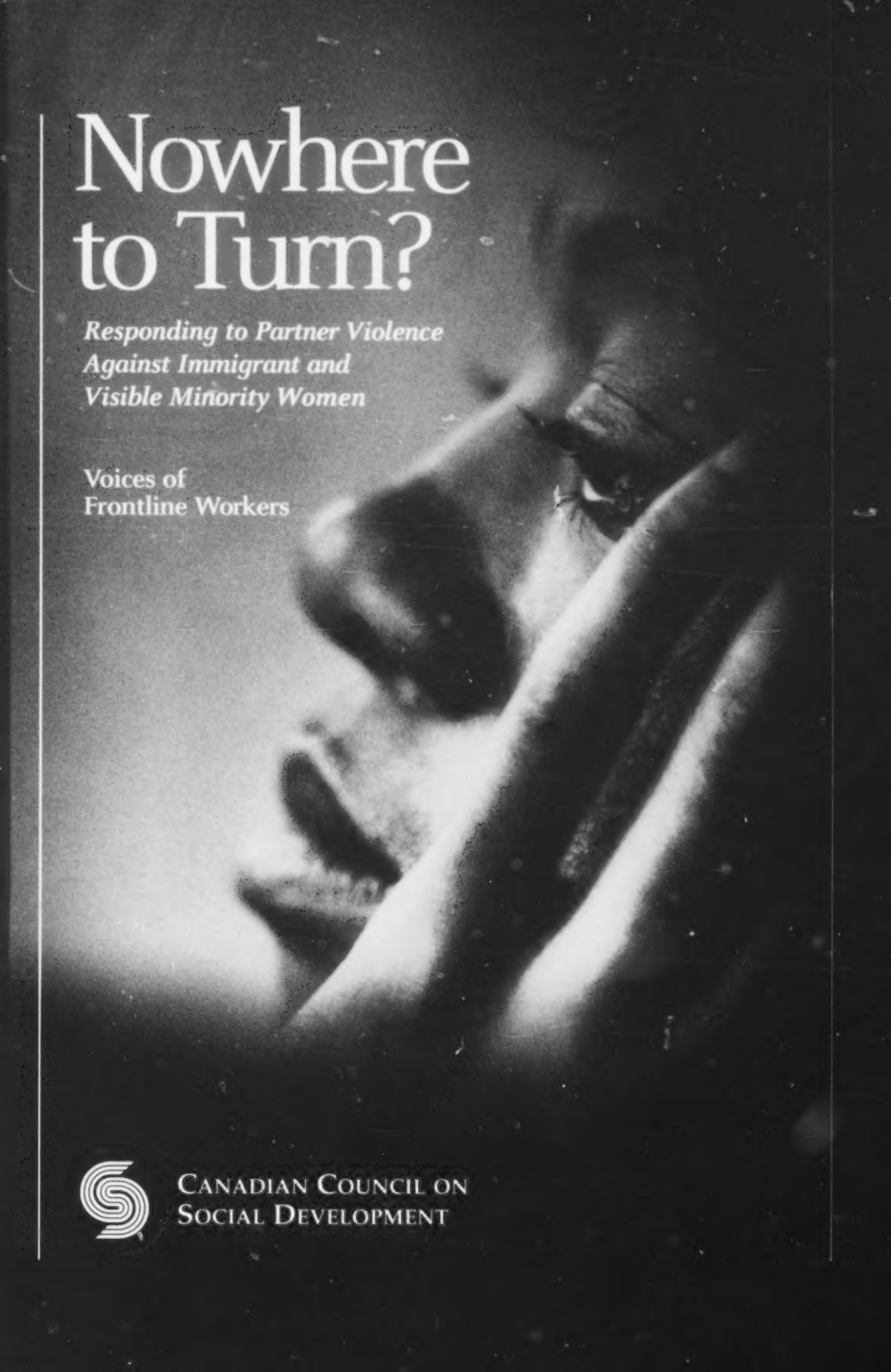
Nowhere to Turn?

Responding to Partner Violence Against Immigrant and Visible Minority Women

Voices of Frontline Workers



Canadian Council on Social Development

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Responding to partner violence against immigrant and visible minority women

Voices of Frontline Workers

Part of a project for the Department of Justice,
Sectoral Involvement in Departmental Policy Development

Canadian Council on Social Development

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On the context of immigrant and visible minority women who experience partner violence:

"These women come to us with their mental health severely affected by all they are living as abused wives, as new immigrants, as mothers, as isolated daughters, as unemployed professionals, and as penniless women without a means of expressing their needs in a clear way to people they feel they can trust."

Focus group participant

On what needs to be done:

"First, immigrants need listeners – someone who won't judge and who will take the necessary time to listen. With immigrant women, context is important in order to understand and be able to provide support. Thus counsellors need to shift their thinking, and look at larger explanations and context."

Focus group participant

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Introduction

This report presents highlights from focus group discussions with frontline community workers involved in helping immigrant and visible minority women who have experienced abuse by their partners.

About 60 organizations serving immigrant and visible minority clients sent representatives to focus group discussions in seven major cities in the fall of 2002. The focus groups – held in Vancouver, Calgary, Winnipeg, Ottawa, Toronto, Montreal and Halifax – were part of a study designed to:

- deepen understanding of the nature and risk factors of partner abuse experienced by immigrant and visible minority women;
- identify actions to enhance the capacity of the justice system, social services and other community agencies to respond to partner violence;
- increase awareness of the needs of this diverse and evolving population, and recommend ways to support victims and reduce partner abuse.

Focus group participants came from organizations that provide a variety of services, including emergency and transitional housing for victims of violence, a range of immigrant and refugee settlement services, victim support services in the justice system, community health services, counselling, public education, training, information, advocacy, and other community-based services.

Most of the focus group participants were themselves immigrants to Canada and members of visible minority groups. There was great empathy expressed for women who have been separated from their culture of origin, yet are not fully accepted or protected in the mainstream society in which they now live. One participant summed up the overwhelming concern of the focus group when she said: "We have to give them hope."

The focus group participants were not a homogeneous group. Everyone brought a unique perspective, based on their own experiences, the organization in which they worked, and their linguistic and cultural community. Yet there was considerable consensus among participants across the country on the major issues, needs, barriers and solutions to this problem.

This Report

To begin, we discuss the context in which the discussions were placed by the participants. The context includes a recognition of different forms of partner abuse and also of the destructive effects of racism and other forms of discrimination on the lives and hopes of immigrant and visible minority women in Canada.

The main section of this report deals with the unique vulnerabilities of immigrant and visible minority women in the context of Canadian laws, practices, attitudes and service systems. It discusses barriers these women face in getting out of abusive situations at home and accessing services as they strive to create a better life for themselves and their children.

The final section summarizes the focus group discussions and suggests actions that had broad support in the discussions across the country.

Not everyone who attended the focus groups will necessarily agree with everything that is written here, and much more was said than could be included in this synthesis. However, it is hoped that all the focus group participants will see in this document many of the dilemmas and directions that they discussed with such energy and candour.

Context

A Societal Problem – A Sensitive Issue

The experience of partner abuse is shared by women from all cultures and countries of origin. During the focus group discussions, concerns were expressed about the sensitivity of associating partner abuse with immigrants and visible minority communities. When it comes to partner violence against women, one participant said, immigrant and visible minority communities are just part of the picture.

> "Certainly it can be exacerbated by certain customs and cultural practices. But that becomes an excuse for society to say that it is more accepted in *these* communities. Violence towards women is accepted in the mainstream culture, period. It is just a reality."

> "Once we accept any form of violence, we open the door a little bit more for all the types of violence."

Certain cultural practices and beliefs *can* add to the barriers experienced by women in visible minority and immigrant communities, but there was widespread agreement among participants from different cultural communities that their cultures *per se* were not the problem.

> "Patriarchy exists in every culture. There are differences, but they are differences in degree. Women have been socialized to do a certain role, the same with white women. It's not *that* different....The experience of violence is universal."

> "There is a general notion out there that immigrant men from some communities are much more prone to violence than other men. But violence is basically about issues of power and control. There is no excuse for it, that simply because someone is an immigrant or refugee that their situation allows them to abuse their powers. It can happen in a rich family, middle-class family, a low-income family and so on. It happens in all communities."

> "I think there has been a rise in the number of women who have died at the hands of violence, and you hear it more and more on the radio. I think something can be done with the legal system and also with the media because of the way that violence is reported. When it becomes simply a statistic, it neutralizes the women so you don't know the identity of the person and whether they were of a particular culture or community. And it neutralizes any effects we can have in terms of interventions we might want to do. When the person who has died is treated as a statistic you hear on the radio, it doesn't bring home the reality of who and what these women really are. The way it is reported: 'another person and her kid dead' really disturbs me. When you are just a statistic, the issue gets buried."

Some participants spoke of being criticized by members of their own cultural communities because they defend the rights of women and identify abuse when others deny it. Naming abuse can run up against deep-seated attitudes about family life and male-female relationships:

> "What is abuse? They think it's discipline. The husband has to teach his wife and children. To slap the wife, that's like spanking the child. It indicates the man cares about his family.... They say we don't want to be like Canadian families where 50% of marriages end in divorce!"

Another participant put the sensitivity in a different light:

> "People may not want to talk about it because there is already a lot of discrimination against their community. There *is* domestic violence in our community, but we don't talk about it because we don't want to reinforce the prejudice. It can feed into stereotypes. People already think you come from a violent place, and that you must be hot-tempered or whatever."

In one group, when discussion turned to the acceptance of domestic violence as a "normal" part of some cultural communities back home, another perspective was given:

> "Where this woman came from, there was no domestic violence. She married a white, middle-class, mainstream Canadian man and he was abusive. She thought *that* was what was normal in Canada."

The Reality of Racism

Racism and other forms of discrimination came up in every focus group discussion. Participants said that racism must be recognized as part of the context in which minorities in Canada live. To pretend that it does not exist is like pretending that partner abuse does not happen.

> "They may not want to talk about abuse because they don't want mainstream society to know; there is already a lot of discrimination against them. I imagine it is that way in other cultural communities too ... so you keep it in because of the racism and not wanting to share that shame."

> "The experience of abuse is compounded by racism. Women are victims of multiple forms of oppression."

> "I have a problem with the justice system, which is just now coming to terms with and starting to recognize hate crimes."

Understanding this context is crucial because of the impact it has in so many areas – from the reporting of violence by abused women, to opportunities for visible minorities in the job market.

> "Immigrants are treated as the 'other.' They want to be perceived as individuals and treated with respect like everyone else and not lumped into the category of 'immigrant.' Women may have a different culture, but they are essentially women."

> "Because I'm a minority woman, I don't know how I am going to be treated. How are people going to respond when I ask for help? So I will continue living in an abusive situation... Being accepted: that's something important."

Focus group participants said there was reluctance among some immigrant and visible minority women to report domestic violence because they feared that if their husbands were arrested and jailed, they would be beaten or killed because of their race. So the women sacrifice their own safety and well-being and do not call for help.

> "The issue of racism has to be flagged all over the place. Women feel like they are in a position where they have to defend their culture because it is being attacked by service providers or the judicial system. They are told that their culture is backward and barbaric, and that is why this violence happens."

> "We are now talking about racial profiling, hate crimes, racial harassment and how it impacts on cultural communities in its many forms. It is really a question that needs to be dealt with, and I don't think the justice system has responded to cultural communities around the question of violence and all the ways that they experience it. There is a lot that needs to be done – and quickly."

The feeling of being an outsider from the mainstream society contributes to isolation and alienation. That feeling, coupled with the frustration of

unemployment or underemployment, may be a risk factor for immigrant and visible minority men.

> "They expected to lead the same kinds of lives they lived before, but they are not able to play the role they expected to play. It's no excuse for violence and it should never happen. But I have seen a lot of situations where things start happening, and the men are not able to be the kind of person that they would ideally want to be."

Different Forms of Abuse

Focus group participants described different forms of abuse. Abuse was characterized generally as being about power and exerting control over another person. A major aspect was the use of physical violence, including sexual assault, but there were also references to other "weapons" – for example, emotional, psychological or financial manipulation by a partner to ensure subservience.

One participant described women who are virtually captive in their own homes:

> "Some of the women who have suffered the most have never been hit. For them, it is an issue of emotional control. I'm not dismissing the homicides or broken bones and bleeding noses. But we also see other types of abuse – not letting her go out and take English classes, not letting her communicate with her own family and friends. You see women living like that for 10 years. Sometimes, it's not until she takes her child to school and the teacher speaks with her that there is an opening."

Financial power can also be used to keep a woman in line. "He has the financial means, so he can do anything. He can say that the woman is incompetent and can't take care of the kids." Even women who have jobs can be trapped.

> "A woman may be allowed to work in a factory and care for the home and children, but she doesn't see the money. He takes it. She has no friends, no life. She goes from the factory to home. How can we help

her? She tells us a little and then she stops. When we tell her where she can go for help, she will not accept it."

Some women emerge from abusive situations with emotional, psychological and physical health problems. Some don't emerge at all.

> "Just yesterday, a woman who was really looking forward to coming to a training class backed away. 'I really want to come,' she said, 'but we've learned to live this way. We've learned to put up with the violence.' There's that sense of not having hope. We have to give them hope."

While other forms of abuse were acknowledged, physical violence was the major topic of the focus group discussions. Every group heard about battered women fleeing for their lives and hiding from their abusers.

> "Women in violent situations go through a process of mourning, and the process of mourning and denial seems like forever. Some cannot get past that stage unless they receive psychological help. Once it gets out that they want help, they are in danger of being killed by their abuser, or of killing themselves."

Vulnerabilities and Barriers

Partner abuse occurs in all cultures, communities and countries. There are particular concerns for women who are immigrants to Canada and visible minorities. Why? Because, compared to other women who suffer partner abuse, these women face additional barriers that prevent them from receiving the necessary help. The vulnerability of immigrant and visible minority women is heightened by unique factors in their life circumstances, and as a result of particular features of our Canadian laws, practices, attitudes and service-delivery systems.

Common Suffering – Common Needs

At the outset, it is important to recognize that these women share a great deal in common with all women who are victims of partner abuse. Discussions about the anguish felt by abused immigrant and visible minority women sound very much like what you would hear from most women in a shelter for

victims of domestic violence. They feel lost, helpless, afraid, hopeless, ashamed and broken.

> "They feel ashamed about the situation they are in, and they tend to blame themselves."
>
> "There are tremendous feelings of guilt and shame. They are looked at as being the one who has broken up the family unit, so that is very hard for them."
>
> "There are fears for their children and for an uncertain future."
>
> "For many immigrant women, there are fears about having their children abducted from them. People say that it is not easy to take the children away from a mother, but we know how easily it can be done."
>
> "Some women are so lonely. They feel abandoned by the family, by the husband, by the system generally. There is great uncertainty about the future. 'How can I survive?' But eventually, in the successful cases, there is a spirit of defiance. 'I *can* make it. I can depend on myself. I can take care of myself.' "
>
> "Women are bombarded by the fact that their culture is being demeaned and that they must deal with the violence."
>
> "Many of these women are afraid of being murdered or of losing their children."
>
> "Together with the guilt and shame and fear of being abandoned, there is a fear of trying to exist in this strange new country."
>
> "There are obvious fears about being deported, and fears for their children's safety. 'Will I be allowed to take my children away from their family? Will I be able to live within my culture and my traditional beliefs within a Canadian context?' "

Immigrant and visible minority women also share many of the same basic needs as other women who have been living with partner abuse and are

seeking help. First, they need safety and protection for themselves and their children. Then they need a decent place to live, counselling, training, income support, legal aid, employment, child care. These are the building blocks of a new life free of violence.

Like other women in abusive situations, immigrant and visible minority women often cling to the hope that their abuser can be made to change his ways and the family can be preserved.

> " 'Can you fix him?' That's usually the first question they ask. 'Can you fix him in a way that makes him understand that the abuse is very hurtful and has a very negative effect on the family?' Above all, the women want to keep the family together."

> "It's usually not their idea to separate. They just want to make the man less abusive, to make some changes."

> "Emotions range from feelings of guilt, pressures to return, feelings of mistrust, fears about their role as a mother, pressure from the children in terms of being an adequate mother."

> "Women need to heal from the abuse, war and trauma they were exposed to, healing from rape and sexual assault, healing even from the settlement process of being in Canada."

Culture Clash

Frontline workers in the focus group discussions noted that some immigrant women come from societies which accord women few, if any, rights. When these women come to Canada, it is like a door opening to new opportunities for greater independence and self-realization. But some husbands and partners are not in favour of this liberation.

> "In Canada, women have power and rights. It is our duty to help raise the consciousness of our immigrant sisters."

One of the few male participants in these focus groups talked about the lenient Canadian society that encourages women to defy the control of their spouses:

"I have been listening to bad things from the woman's side only. Since I am the only man here, I am going to give a different perspective. Let's say a family is living in a developing country and all are very happy. The family comes over here because they lose their land. Back home, they had religious bindings as well as moral and cultural bindings, but when they come over here, it's a free world where you can do anything you want.

If the husband is going out and working hard seven, eight, or nine hours a day to bring in money, and the wife is going somewhere else to see friends and others, naturally the husband is concerned. He says, 'Listen, when I am here, you have to be here. How come the kids are going out and are not in control? Why are the girls doing this and the boys doing that? Why aren't the kids coming home at 8 or 9 o'clock? Why are all these things happening?'

There are certain rules which the husband and wife put down, then the wife goes and dismantles the whole thing. Naturally, the husband gets mad, he can't take that, and that's when violence happens. Back home, some of these women are like a bird in a cage. Now that the cage door is open, they can do anything they want. So violence happens."

Another participant said, "We're talking about gender equality. That is a new dialogue for many families." She described a single mother whose teenage son was trying to run the family.

"How does he get control? Through violence. They have to have power and retain control. Violence is one method. They may have used it in the past in the country they came from, or they may feel they have to use it now because of the new circumstances."

"In our culture, we are raised that women are the possessions or objects of men."

"If I am told that I must walk three steps behind, then that is okay, because that is what I used to do. I wouldn't question it."

Other participants, however, talked about families who come here relatively happy and without any experience of abuse by the partner, yet end up in destructive conflict in the new environment. One of the factors identified for this was the loss of traditional checks and balances in the society they left behind.

> "There are a number of women who have said 'This never happened at home.' That speaks to the break-up of the family structure. The checks and balances aren't there. The man is not going to abuse his wife when he knows all of her brothers are going to descend on him the next day."

One participant told of her father years ago intervening back home when her sister's partner was abusive. "This was a reflection of our community's value system that violence against women is unacceptable."

Another factor identified was the wrenching adjustment required to adapt to a new society.

> "I have received a lot of calls from women where, for the first time, their husbands have hit them, have physically abused them. When they were in their home country, the husband might have been verbally abusive once in a while, but never physically laid a hand on them until they came to this country. I'm not trying to justify the abuse they are facing here, but I think a lot of it has to do with issues of control. You don't feel you are in control of your life."

> "For a visible minority, especially those who have just arrived, it's very hard to go to the police because for them, the police have a different connotation."

> "In some cultural communities, the extended family is the biggest part of the whole support system that you depend on. Women don't make the decisions; they are made by an elder in the community."

> "Most of the social pressure comes from ethnic communities themselves, so the communities are not very likely to openly support women who are trying to leave their husbands. That would challenge their whole patriarchal system. But there are individual women who

are taking it upon themselves – of course, with the consent and permission of their husbands – to support the women who are trying to get out of abusive situations."

Loss of Social and Community Supports

A key vulnerability identified in the focus groups was the loss of traditional social and community supports for women. It may happen when the family moves to Canada and is therefore separated from their extended family and friends. But it can also happen to women who leave their abusive partner if her partner's family, friends and the community at large turn on her.

> "Women cannot just go next door .... the sense of cultural community versus mainstream individualism tells her, and him, that no one is watching."

> "How do I advocate on behalf of my child in a school system that is not responsive or does not embrace what it is that our family needs and represents?"

> "When we come here, we lose our support system. It's all been dismantled and we are looking at how we can survive in this new environment."

> "If I leave home, where am I going to go? I don't have extended family here. Back home, you depend on others. The woman doesn't make that kind of decision. It is made by some elder in her community. In many cases, she still depends on her parents back home to make the decision, but they don't know the situation here. They're likely to say, 'Stay with him or you will be lost in the new country.' "

> "Back home, they knew how to deal with violence. They knew what their rights were and they had support mechanisms. When they come here, I've seen the abuser take advantage by saying, 'I'm the only person here for you, and this is what the community says about you.'"

> "Without a man's support, woman doesn't feel comfortable or secure."

"Parents will say, 'Stay with him, because you will be lost in the new country.' She will be debating what we social workers are saying to her, and yet her parents back home are telling her that she will not be able to survive."

"In the community, there is a lot of pressure and gossip and wrong information going around."

"A lot of women are fearful of exploitation because their community is so small. They are afraid they will be ostracized by their community, and get hate mail and phone calls."

Sometimes what the community says about an abused woman who seeks help to stop the violence is not supportive.

"In some communities, revealing domestic violence as a problem isolates the woman. Their own culture rejects them and the mainstream culture won't accept them."

One frontline participant spoke about a woman who had obtained a restraining order against her husband.

"She said 'I need to ask you something. I don't know what to do. A sister from my church told me I had to stop the restraining order against my husband. She said Jesus is coming, and if the order is there, I will go to hell.' "

Cultural communities in Canada are diverse, and some of these communities are struggling to find their place of respect and identity within the Canadian mosaic. One participant pointed out that different communities are at different stages in their adjustment to this new country.

"In newly arrived communities, some community associations may be a little more defensive and protective. They are not ready to look at these kinds of issues. Some communities are more open."

"Some communities are very supportive of abused women and others are totally not. Every culture has its own way – it may be spending

time with the family or through attending religious institutions. We might see it as unsupportive when, in fact, there is support."

For the woman, the worst of all possible worlds is to be forced to choose between her community and her personal safety. Because many cultural communities are small and closely interconnected, the woman and her children may have to run away from the whole community in order to be safe, if family and friends take the abuser's side.

> "Many women don't come to Canada with their extended families, so their communities are like their families. They fear that if they speak up about personal family matters, they will be rejected by their communities, so in a sense, it is like your family disowning you. That fear is always there."

> "Women are leaving not only their partner, but their cultural community, extended family, and faith community as well. Even if they flee to another city or province, the cultural connections are so strong that it is often easy for the abuser to find her. Young women often don't realize what they are giving up, that they cannot reconnect to their cultural communities. That is a huge loss and a huge barrier to women."

The Language Barrier

Women who are newcomers to Canada and who have limited language skills in English or French are acutely disadvantaged when trying to access assistance and information.

> "How can women who cannot speak English call 9-1-1?"

Participants shared many stories about women who did not speak English or French trying to call the police for help, but getting none because of their inability to communicate adequately with authorities. There were incidents where the police received a distress call, and because they had no interpreter and the husband spoke English, they listened to him. Of course, he did not implicate himself – he blamed his wife for causing trouble.

In other cases, the children may be asked to interpret the woman's distress call, and if they are sympathetic to their father or worried about the family breaking apart, they may deny that any abuse has occurred.

> "They are at the same risk as many other women, but because of the lack of language communication, it is more difficult for them to get assistance."

Not being able to speak the language has huge implications for a woman's access to information. An abusive partner may use misleading information to keep a woman trapped in a violent situation. If she has no means of finding out about her options, in her own language, she will continue to be victimized and see no way out.

> "If a woman is told that she can go to a shelter, she will worry: 'Who is going to speak my language? How am I going to explain my situation to a stranger? Will they understand my culture?' "

> "There are many translators and interpreters; many white people are doing that. They know the language, but they don't know the culture."

Because of a lack of resources, many service agencies and offices use volunteer interpreters from the women's own cultural communities. In some cities, however, there isn't even money available to give bus fare to the volunteer interpreters so they can get to meetings at the courthouse or the community centre. Some focus group participants were themselves volunteer interpreters and they felt guilty because they could not meet all the needs. Concerns were also expressed about using community volunteers because of issues of confidentiality.

> "Even if interpreters are from the same culture and speak the same language, they are using their own assumptions about domestic violence and abuse. When they are interpreting, they may not actually be saying what the woman is expressing."
> "If the woman has to bring someone from their own ethnic community with them, confidentiality is out the window. People trust their friends, but a lot of people don't have friends they can trust *that* much."

> "As a service support system, we have to concentrate on the quality and professionalism of the interpreters that are used. They must be bound by rules of confidentiality, adhere to a code of ethics, and not be in a conflict of interest (such as related to the victim), and they must be paid a wage for their services."

To understand how much a woman will suffer to protect her privacy, consider this account from someone who provides information in the community about rights and services for victims of domestic violence:

> "It is a story that I almost couldn't believe. A woman came to me one day and said I had spoken to her ESL (English as a Second Language) class two years earlier. 'I didn't want to trust anyone within my own community. I decided when I told my story, I was going to tell you. But I knew my English wasn't good enough. I have been learning English for two years. Now I'm ready. Now I have the words to tell you my story.' "

The issue of independent and professional interpretation services may also arise in other contexts, such as in agencies that provide health care services or counselling. One focus group participant said that her organization did not accept husbands as suitable interpreters for their wives.

> "You could see a woman for two or three years. She could be beaten every time before her appointment, but you would not be told that because her partner is interpreting for her. Only professional interpretation should be used."

> "More and more we are seeing interracial marriages, so even if a woman goes for help, the person who is providing the services can be up against a number of cultures. It is sometimes not enough to know just one language or one culture. This is where the origin and culture comes in. It can also have an impact on the kind of services received."

In the two French-speaking focus group discussions, a barrier in relation to Canada's official languages was also identified. Participants described difficulties for both French and English speakers – for French-speaking women trying to access services in predominantly English Canada, and for English-speaking women trying to access services in Quebec.

The Immigration Dilemma

Many women who immigrate to Canada do so as spouses, and their husbands are the primary immigrant. The women often do not know what their rights are in this country. They are not familiar with how the immigration system or the justice, social and other systems work. They do not know where to turn.

In all the focus group discussions, participants shared stories of women who were terrified of being deported if they reported that their partners were abusing them. In some cases, the women were told by their abusers that they were in Canada on his sufferance, and that if she misbehaved, he would send her back.

> "Their partners purposely misinform them about the acceptable customs in Canada. They prefer to keep the women unaware of their own rights as women, as partners, and as newly landed immigrants. The women are told that as sponsored arrivals in this country, they have no legal rights, no rights in general, and that if they complain to anyone, the husbands can have them deported and keep the children because these men are Canadian citizens and therefore have all the rights."

> "Women who have been sponsored by their partners experience threats of deportation. More and more women have mentioned this. Their partner will lie to them and say, 'If you tell anyone, I will deport you.' Or he will threaten to tell her family and she will be blamed for breaking up the family."

> "For sponsored women, the abusers always say that if she leaves them, immigration authorities will send her back. That is such a big myth."

> "Refugee women often have to claim that they have a happy family, then they feel that they can't report otherwise."

> " 'If I call the police, he will have a criminal record, and he will be deported. Then what am I going to do?' Women who come under their partner's refugee claim are afraid that they will have to go back too."

A participant said women should be told that they can go to Immigration Canada and explain why they have to leave their spouse/sponsor. "You can take the weight off people's shoulders." Another participant said that Immigration should make it easier for abused women to leave. The women should not have to wait until they have been physically harmed before they feel they can escape.

> "It shouldn't mean that your partner has to strike you. Threats are enough. The words alone should be enough. We shouldn't have to wait for something to happen."

But there can be other complications. The woman may be in the process of sponsoring her own family back home. If she is financially dependent on the abuser, she may be afraid to jeopardize her family sponsorship by starting over on her own. One focus group participant told of a client who was staying in an abusive situation for a few more months until her mom and dad arrived in Canada.

For some women, the idea of leaving home when you have not yet adjusted to this new country is terrifying.

> "They cannot fathom living alone as single mothers with their children in a new country which is still strange to them. That type of life is simply not part of their culture in their country of origin."

Crisis Response

Immigrant and visible minority women may not know what to expect when they call police in a crisis. If their experience with police in their country of origin was negative, they may not want to take a chance on calling the police here.

> "If your homeland was a place where the police were your enemy, chances are, when you come to this culture, the police are not the first place you are going to look for help."

Women who expect help from the police may be surprised and unhappy when the police respond by arresting their partners. "A lot of clients come to me and say 'I don't want the police to take my husband away,' " said one focus group participant. Instead, they want the police to talk to their partner

and set him straight. They don't realize that the decision to charge or not to charge is not theirs to make, that police have set procedures to follow in these types of incidents.

But what most upset the focus group participants was how often the woman is also charged with abuse. Cross-charging or dual-charging was identified as a major issue and a systemic problem.

> "The women are also being charged, even though they can't do the damage that men can. Often, the woman has experienced violence many times before she calls the police. She has gone through it so often, and finally, she might pick up a coffee cup, for example, and she gets charged with assault with a weapon. He just used his fists, so he gets a lesser charge of common assault. But the women need help, not charges."

> "Some immigrant women are being detained in custody for allegedly entering the country illegally. Many of them have been victims of violence in many forms, not just at the hands of a partner. When I get to meet with them and start to work with them, there are issues of language, fears related to our justice system because of the justice system in their home country, and a lot of confusion about who they can trust, who they can talk to."

> "In an ideological context, the judicial system is a racist, classist and interrogative system, so its laws and legislation will always affect women more. The police are part of that system and its delivery. So when we say that police should have sensitivity training, it doesn't always work. When they are forced to do that, the woman can end up paying the price. Not only do we have to tell the women that they might be counter-charged, we also have to warn them that they might go to jail. There are immigrant and visible minority women who are going to jail because they have chosen to defend themselves. One of them had thrown an ashtray at a man and she was in jail for a month."

> "It's very easy for the husband to say that the fight started because she was yelling and screaming and beating the children. Police will accept that information. They don't take the woman's call as seriously."

There was also praise for police services that have developed protocols on domestic violence response and established partnerships with culturally appropriate community support services. And there was this story, for example:

> "When both the husband and wife are products of a patriarchal society, he believes he has the right to beat his wife, while she is steadfast in the belief that she must remain the nucleus of her family unit – at all costs. So she remains silent about the abuse. In one case, the husband was so certain of his power to control that he beat his wife who was not subjecting herself to his rule, then he called the police to report her, thinking that she would be incarcerated. He was in for a surprise."

Legal Recourse

There were a number of comments about how the court system works. For example, many participants talked about how long it usually takes for charges against abusers to make their way through the justice system.

There were also complaints about how little time people working in the court system have to concentrate on an individual case and little time to try to understand what the woman is going through. Many of the immigrant and visible minority women who are victims of partner assault are often confused and intimidated by Canada's court system. They don't understand how the process works, and some feel insulted by the way the system treats them.

> "What we need is a woman-friendly system."

> "They feel that they are not protected by the restraining orders or the peace bonds; nothing is going on. They are actually in more danger and even if they wanted to stop the process, they are not allowed to."

> "The woman herself wants to shield her partner because she is not sure if he will come back home alive."

> "Abused women need to be red-flagged in the court system so that they can be given the supports they need. This would encourage more women to go through with the process."

> "Their biggest fear is of the system itself. There is a lack of information and how to get it.... You need to have information, and it needs to be provided in a language you can understand and by people you feel you can trust."

A major concern among the focus group participants was that the judicial system "doesn't know how to handle the abusers." Probation officers are overloaded and they cannot monitor offenders effectively in the community. Women are intimidated into recanting, and they lose credibility with the courts. There are few counselling or anger management programs for men.

However, there was recognition of some progress being made in jurisdictions which have created special domestic violence courts, with counsel and other court staff who are knowledgeable about and experienced with domestic violence issues. When victims' services are available, they can also provide valuable support.

Many abused women cannot afford regular legal fees, so they turn to legal aid for matters involving separation and child custody. But they may or may not qualify. For example, they may be ineligible for legal aid if they are part owners of the house, even though the abuser is still living there.

> "How many women can pay that much to have a good lawyer? Not many."

Community service-providers understand that there are major pressures on the legal aid system. Legal aid lawyers face a burdensome caseload and they may not be able to spend much time on each case. But there were also frustrations expressed about the way some clients have been treated. "They don't understand how difficult it is for these women." On the other hand, "we have some good legal aid lawyers who will take cases for us," said one participant.

> "A woman may not want a divorce, only a separation. Often, that is not understood by a legal aid lawyer; they do not see the reality, how difficult it is for a woman in this situation....and the whole system is so slow."

Some participants were quite despairing of attitudes in their own communities about the laws to protect women and children. One talked about how men in her community continued to defend a man who was jailed for having sexual relations with his under-age stepdaughter.

> "They said she liked him and accepted him, so why was he in prison? She is a child; she doesn't know what is good for her. Her stepfather is a big man, and all the men were helping him. Our community does not have enough awareness. We have to educate our women that our laws will help them and protect them."

> "The government is afraid of what is happening in families…but you have people in the community denying it all the time."

> "Sometimes the authorities do not know how to implement the recommendations."

Passport to Poverty?

For most immigrant families, a big part of settlement in Canada is getting a job and a steady income. If that does not happen, the adjustment process can be stalled. Poverty is not unique to immigrant families, but it was identified as a major family stressor compounding the woman's vulnerability.

> "For immigrants, the stresses of living in a different country are very strong. They feel like aliens on another planet. They don't know the language. They have no financial or job opportunities. This puts stresses on the whole family."

Many immigrants, both male and female, are shocked to find that the economic opportunities they expected when they came to Canada are far from their reach. Economic issues raised in the focus groups included the rejection of credentials earned in other countries and discrimination in the labour market.

> "So I have to work seven days a week. If it was possible to have 72 hours in a day, I would work 72 hours, just to survive and have a roof over our heads."

Many immigrants who are professionals feel betrayed when the qualifications and experience that got them into the country are not recognized by Canadian professional bodies or employers. If they cannot afford to spend years re-qualifying to work in their profession, they may end up in low-end jobs or unemployed, on a rapid downward spiral into poverty.

> "Many of these women have been well-educated in their own countries. But when they come here, they cannot speak English and their credentials are not recognized. They need orientation to the new culture. They need help to maintain a balance between the old culture and values and the new culture and values."

> "It doesn't matter how much counselling you give them, if there are no opportunities for them, they will end up in a low-end job."

> "If you have no money, they can exploit you. If you have no job, what are you going to do? You end up cutting here and cutting there."

> "When the women do not have what's necessary to fulfill even their basic needs, they are not going to bother to access other services."

> "Many women were professionals in their countries of origin, then they come to Canada and their degrees are not recognized. That in itself is a very big fear because they now have to depend on their partners or husbands."

A key concern raised in the focus groups related to women trying to escape from abusive situations where the abuser has had all the financial control. In such cases, the women must learn to make their own way, and to do so, they need supports for adequate income, employment training and child care. Women who have been financially dependent can encounter enormous obstacles to setting up a new, stable household for themselves and their children.

> "These women are without funds and often, without hope."

There are women who were "not allowed to have one dollar" by their spouses, said one participant. They have no bank account, no credit; they have never signed a lease. They are starting from scratch. How well they

survive depends on the social and financial supports they receive, which are discussed next.

Social and Financial Supports

There were two major categories of concern about social and financial supports for abused immigrant and visible minority women. One was the appropriateness of the supports that agencies are able to provide. The other was the adequacy and accessibility of those services.

Social supports cover a range of services that immigrant and visible minority women need when they are thinking about leaving an abusive situation and after they have left. One service that received considerable attention in the focus groups was counselling. Counselling services may involve listening to the woman and working out with her what kinds of supports she needs, or it might require the involvement of mental health professionals.

> "Many of these women come to us with their mental health severely damaged by all they have been living through – as abused wives, as new immigrants, as mothers, as isolated daughters, as unemployed professionals, as penniless women – and without a means of expressing their needs in a clear way, to people they feel they can trust."

> "I am beginning to see that economic abuse has a more profound effect on women of colour and immigrant and refugee women than on mainstream women. I regularly answer e-mails from women who have been brought to this country to be a domestic worker or an exotic dancer. I do not think a mainstream woman would be experiencing those things because they are less likely to be working in the same job categories."

> "They have no idea where to go for help. They are overwhelmed by feelings of helplessness."

> "Immigrant women need listeners first, someone who won't judge them and who will take the time necessary to listen. With immigrant women, context is important in order to understand and be able to

provide support. Thus counsellors need to shift their thinking and look at larger explanations and context."

Women with disabilities and special needs have an even harder time than other abused women in trying to access the supports they require, participants said.

Finding a safe place to stay is a first priority when women leave the family home, and the first line of defence for abused women tends to be the shelter system. According to the focus group participants, the main concerns about the shelters were a) finding a culturally appropriate place where an immigrant or visible minority woman would be able to talk to someone in her own language, someone who understood her customs; or b) finding a place at all, depending on how overextended the system is at the time.

Culturally appropriate services include supports in the woman's own language and in an environment of trust.

> "If she goes to a shelter, she wonders: 'Who is going to speak my language? How will I explain to a stranger? Will they understand my culture?' "

> "Women need supports available in their language of comfort and in a place that can do outreach to embrace them and develop a trusting relationship with them."

Housing and income supports are key to the survival of many women and children once they leave the shelter. Major barriers were identified, including long waiting lists for subsidized or second-stage housing, difficulties in finding affordable private-sector accommodations, and social assistance rates and rules that consign families to living in poverty in substandard housing in poor neighbourhoods.

> "Politicians should have to live off the amount provided by social assistance for awhile, and see how far it goes to meeting their basic needs."

One participant spoke of "empowering" a woman with children to make her own decision to leave an abusive relationship. The woman did not have a job so she had to go on social assistance.

> "She called me to say 'I think I have to go back. In the neighbourhood and the building where I am living, there are fights at my door and people are screaming in the middle of the night. There are broken bottles and blood. My children are more scared than they were before.' You feel so powerless because what can you do? There should be safe, affordable housing for her and her children."

> "Violence is just more hidden among people in better financial situations. They want to save face in the community. For example, the husband and doctor who abuses his wife, she is not going to go to an agency for help."

Rising Demands, but Inadequate Resources

It was not clear from the focus group discussions whether or not domestic violence was increasing among immigrant and visible minority communities in Canada's major cities. Some sensed that the problem was getting worse, but others felt that the increase in cases meant that more women were deciding to speak out after many years of suffering.

There was general agreement, however, that more abuse is being reported. Greater reporting may mean that more women feel empowered to try to protect themselves, but it could also mean that more women are being abused. Whichever is true, increased reporting means that demands for services and supports of all kinds are increasing. Focus group participants from across the country said that funding and other resources were not keeping pace with these increased demands.

In fact, some participants said that services in their provinces had been seriously curtailed. "There is a breakdown in the social infrastructure of our community," one participant said.

> "I believe that there is a cycle that occurs that supports the further oppression of immigrant and refugee women. The government recognizes the communities as special interest groups, so a pot of

money is given to that community for specific services. They establish ethno-specific services, and allow the service to establish itself, usually on a small scale with a small budget. But people don't just run out to ethno-specific services; there are issues of trust and confidentiality. The project exists for two or three years, to see what they can do, but it's a band-aid effect. If it doesn't work well enough for what the government wants, then those are the first programs to go when there are funding cutbacks. Then the community has to re-establish the programs again, and often the community leaders are doing the work from their backyards or front porches – which creates more safety issues for them and their clients."

"We become a cheap source of labour."

"Social workers, because they are overburdened, do not have the time to figure out what is going on with immigrant women, for example to screen appropriately for violence and abuse. There are barriers at every turn. Cuts to social services, such as in housing, disproportionately affect immigrant and minority women. The system is overloaded. Doors that could once be opened can't any longer. There is less flexibility."

"I will work with women's agencies to see if they are carrying out their services in an equitable fashion to all groups. That is how I intervene. My experience is that they don't."

"If we look at this region, we have one organization mainly working with immigrant and refugee women and violence. The services are just not there. If I were an abused woman and I knew that my culture would ostracize me for speaking up, I would want to be certain that I had someplace to go where I could get support for me and my children. If I report my husband and he is put in jail, which is the law, it would leave me out in the cold with no place to go. This is a big deal for immigrant and visible minority women! We need to have places for them to be able to go and feel safe and secure before we recommend, suggest or encourage them to leave, otherwise, where are we going to put them? There are no services available in their language, where they can get their own food, or have moral and spiritual support...the services are so fragmented."

"Nowadays, when she goes to the doctor and says 'I cannot sleep; I have this problem; I'm having nightmares,' she gets pills for depression. Women are surviving on that, and their health is going downhill."

"In our culture, we don't seek health services unless we are dying. As long as I can stand up and work, it's nothing. We think that it costs money to go to see the doctor, and I don't have the luxury of buying the extra medicine. I will bear it until it is the last resort."

"Counselling agencies that provide support for these women are exhausted, and they cannot respond adequately to the population. The shift to short-term, solution-focused counselling is not an appropriate model to use with this population and it lacks caring."

The point was made repeatedly that fragmentation of services makes the inadequacy of resources even worse. Problems in one service system spill over into another. For example, if there are long waiting lists for affordable housing for abused women, they will stay longer in emergency shelters, which means that the shelters become overcrowded and have to turn away desperate women.

A woman whose mental health is fragile and is on a waiting list for counselling may end up losing her children to child protection services because she can no longer cope. A woman who cannot get training or child care and a job, and feels degraded being on social assistance may end up going back to her abuser, and the cycle will repeat itself.

"There is some inter-sectoral work going on, but we are still in the infancy stage. It's so fragmented. There is no coordination or integration of systems between the shelter sector and the long-term housing sector. The shelters are backed up because women are staying longer. Women of colour and minority women are not getting the kinds of services or supports they require. Some have no place to go, other than to family or friends. We are a long way off in terms of having policies and systems that are responsive to immigrant women."

"We don't have enough staff, and we need interpreters. We don't have enough funding in most organizations for counsellors and psychologists or other professionals to deal with the women."

"Women are set up to fail by the current system. Rent is too expensive, and subsidized housing is not available."

"There is no housing for women. Landlords are not eager to give housing to a single woman with kids and no income, and the shelters have no space."

The funding mechanisms for nonprofit and voluntary organizations are also an issue. Short-term project-based funding and demonstration projects provide only stop-gap solutions for limited periods of time. Cultural community groups and minority women's groups feel they are forced to scramble after whatever funding is left over once the mainstream agencies have taken the lion's share.

"We have the organizations but we don't have the economic capacities. We are so limited because of economics."

"There is a disproportionate allocation of funding to the mainstream organizations."

"I don't want to take those mainstream programs away, but there has to be some recognition of changing needs. Money has to be matched with the demographic shifts. We are the marginalized groups, so we end up in the very strange situation of being forced to compete with each other for scarce funds."

"Most services and supports are short-term – and short-sighted."

"We need extra programs for the women to be able to access."
"We need to honour the various fields of expertise that already exist within our community organizations. But to do so, we will need funding to be able to use this wealth of expertise to provide training."

Those who work to provide social supports to abused immigrant and visible minority women feel that they are undervalued.

> "We are under-funded and underpaid. We have to empower ourselves, too."

Suggestions for Change

If we could communicate only one message from these focus groups to decision-makers, it would be that there is a pressing need to act – together – to achieve a comprehensive and coordinated response to the problem of partner abuse among immigrant and visible minority women. By replacing the current kaleidoscope of systemic gaps and shortcomings with a more coordinated approach, we can give these women and their families a sense of hope.

> "We have to link with other organizations and keep pushing forward. Systems are not going to change unless we make some noise."

> "We need to put in place supports in the educational system, in social services, and in the judicial systems, wherever they might be needed, because that is where the decisions are made."

While immigrant and visible minority women share many of the same needs as other abused women – such as the need for safety and protection, emergency shelter and longer-term housing, counselling and legal aid, income support and child care, training and employment – they are even more vulnerable because they face additional barriers.

They often face cultural barriers getting out of their relationships, despite the presence of abuse, and they face more barriers in getting services that meet their unique cultural needs and circumstances. Canadian laws, practices, attitudes, and systems seem to pose further constraints.

There was general agreement that action is urgently required. The focus groups had many ideas about what needed to be done.

> "Government institutions need to be open to hearing and understanding our voices."

"We should have more shelters; we have very few shelters and need more centres."

"There should be funding available for prevention."

"It is important that policy-makers recognize the problem and not be bogged down with definitions."

Raising Awareness

One of the most difficult challenges associated with partner abuse is changing attitudes – within cultural communities, within service systems and within the larger society. Prevention takes time, persistent effort and public education.

Participants suggested that raising awareness should start in the schools, with education about cultural sensitivity, racial tolerance, and gender equity. They also wanted to see greater emphasis placed on understanding the issues that affect immigrant and visible minority women in the training courses for lawyers, police officers, immigration officials and social workers.

"Part of our responsibility is advocacy – on any level possible – and utilizing the resources that we do have."

"We have had governments that are not for the people, but for corporations. How do we get around that? We have to work to ensure a greater awareness among decision-makers, policy-makers and the justice system. People of colour and us as workers have to create a greater awareness of the issues we face as organizations and as a society."

Community organizations have a role to play, as do educational institutions and trainers. Focus group participants who are struggling to change attitudes within their own communities suggested that efforts must be made to engage in a dialogue among different communities about domestic violence and gender issues.

"Advocacy and mobilization are important. We have to work to challenge the system. It is important for women's organizations to come together on common ground, to show that we are working for

women, and to challenge the system and demand equality. We have to challenge the systems together."

"We have to educate people, rather than blaming women for beating up men, or men for beating up women. There should be a process of educating; it's not just about empowering women by telling them about their rights, but rather educating both her and him about the rights of each other."

"We need to educate our younger generations that violence against women is not accepted."

Information and Immigration

Information, participants said, is power. Immigrant women should be informed about their rights as soon as they set foot in Canada, and preferably before.

"I would like to see that every newcomer receives a package and appropriate information from immigration officials."

A number of participants suggested that a full package of information on rights and responsibilities, including family law, be given to all immigrants – both women and men – at their point of entry into Canada. They also urged that more information be provided at Canadian embassies in other countries, so that people have a better idea of what to expect before they get here.

One of the biggest fears, if not the major fear, of immigrant women is that they will be deported and lose their children if they report abuse or leave the home. In most cases, the immigration relationship tends to be with the man. Some participants suggested that a gender analysis of immigration policies is needed in order to correct the balance.

"Women need information about their rights, all of their rights, and an understanding about Children's Aid or child protection, depending on where they live."

At the very least, immigrant women should be assured that reporting abuse will not result in their deportation and that they are entitled to services in their own right if they leave an abuser.

Language Services

Women need information about their rights and support services to be delivered in a language they can understand and in which they can communicate. A serious gap was identified in language services, particularly interpretation.

Not only is there a shortage of interpretation services for police, the courts, and social and health services, but what is available is often informal and done by volunteers, including volunteers from the woman's cultural community, who may be relatives or friends of the abuser.

> "We also need appropriate training for interpreters."

This service should be paid, professional and of high quality. There should be rules about confidentiality and conflict of interest.

Breaking the silence about domestic abuse has been difficult in mainstream Canadian society, and it is even more difficult to do so in other cultural communities. Immigrant and visible minority women in Canada should not have to wait for years while they take language classes in order to be able tell someone their story and get the help they need.

> "Women need support in their language of comfort."

Woman-friendly Services and Outreach

In a way, women's organizations and community agencies of various kinds are trying to replace the informal networks of family and friends that many abused immigrant and visible minority women are missing from their lives back home.
Organizations are trying to create spaces that are warm and welcoming. In some drop-in centres, women are encouraged just to come and talk and get comfortable with the staff who can help them when they are ready.

"More funding is needed for services specifically for immigrant women and children."

"We need to have a woman-friendly system in government and on various levels. Again, I would like to see the language aspect taken care of because when we talk about domestic violence, it means the police are involved. And in so many cases, the police will go into a house with no interpreters whatsoever, yet they know that this family is from a specific ethnic group. The wife does not know how to express herself, and she has no idea about what is being said. This needs to be addressed."

"The biggest fear I hear of is the system itself and the people who are supposed to be providing assistance. There is a lack of information available to these women and how to get it. When you come from a society where violence is acceptable and move into a society where it isn't, where there are rules, regulations and punishment for abuse, it requires an adjustment and before you are able to do that, you need to have information. And the information needs to be provided in a language you can understand and by people you feel you can trust."

Because service providers know that many women would not be allowed to participate in a program about women and violence, cooking classes or dressmaking clubs are organized to draw women out of the house. Some women are reached with information and support when they go to a community health centre to see a doctor.

"They need services from people they can trust; they need to feel safe in the relationships that they develop in the community."

The focus groups noted that more woman-friendly services like these are needed to encourage and enable abused women to come forward.

"We need to look at services that are going to provide the elements necessary for women to function."
"I would like to see many more training courses for women, services for women and at the same time, education for men."

> "In terms of needs, women need safety for themselves and their children, they need safety in every area of their life, such as housing, and they need to be able to speak as a woman of colour or an immigrant woman and not be racially responded to with discrimination or oppression."

Focus group participants also spoke about the need for more culturally appropriate shelters for women and more outreach in the community to seek out immigrant and visible minority victims of abuse. Shelters usually have no staff time to do outreach work because they are overrun with the emergency cases on their doorsteps.

There are very few programs for men who are abusers. Such programs are another way to prevent further violence and help change attitudes.

Sensitizing Police and the Courts

Participants in the focus groups made a number of suggestions to help improve the police response to domestic violence involving immigrant and visible minority families. More cultural and sensitivity training was frequently mentioned.

Another idea was the deployment of specially trained male-female police teams for these partner abuse cases. The teams should have dependable access to interpretation services and to social workers who would get involved once the immediate crisis was over. Police forces should maintain a resource index of the community services available so that they can refer abused women.

> "We need more cultural sensitivity training in the system – judicial and social services. When the police are called to a home for domestic abuse, there should be a male and female police officer at all times, and the woman victimized should be given a package of information [outlining available services] in various languages."

Several participants said that police should be given education and sensitivity training to improve their understanding of the factors affecting abused women in immigrant and visible minority communities.

> "Police officers should work for a few days in a community centre. It would help the police officer to understand some of the cultural aspects of the community, and it would help make the women feel more comfortable around them. In our country, there is no concept of calling the police for things like violence, so there is some hesitation when we bring police officers to group meetings. Although there is no mandatory aspect, police training should require them to work in community organizations for at least a few days. This recommendation has never been worked out."

The recruitment, hiring and promotion of more visible minorities as police officers was also suggested, along with ongoing and increased anti-racism and anti-sexism education, and internal mechanisms to detect abusers within the police service.

Similarly, the court system should recruit and hire more minorities and provide more sensitivity training to lawyers and court staff. Calls for a more "woman-friendly" justice system were common in each of the focus groups. Participants suggested that abused women should be "red-flagged" in the court system and given the supports they need, such as interpretation and culturally appropriate victims' services.

Alternatives to Abuse

If we actually believe that women should not have to live with abuse, it is important to offer alternatives that are viable. Offering an immigrant woman a passport to poverty for herself and her children is not a viable alternative. Neither is living with constant fear of retribution from her partner and his family and friends.

> "We have started a pilot project that brings together people from the community to discuss the issue of violence within the community. As well, we have a group discussion with the women about what is violence, what to call it and what their rights are. These two aspects are very important because you are educating people, then it is up to them."

Some of the issues – like the meagre support provided through social assistance and long waiting lists for affordable housing – are common to all

women facing an abusive situation. It should be unacceptable in this society, participants noted, that women return to an abusive home because there is nowhere else for them to go.

For immigrant and visible minority women fleeing abuse, isolation becomes a major issue if they are ostracized by their own communities. In such cases, access to culturally sensitive supports and services becomes even more essential, yet the services needed – from counselling to child care, from legal aid to language services – are perpetually under-funded.

Focus group participants also referred to overburdened probation services that can't adequately supervise abusers who continue to threaten their partners in the community.

Some of these women require training to get into the labour market, and others need to have their previous training and experience recognized by employers and professional associations. Programs that are designed to help bridge immigrant women and men into the Canadian workforce are effective, but they tend to be demonstration projects only, rather than part of a comprehensive systemic response.

System Coordination and Community-based Organizations

A major theme among the focus groups was the fragmentation of service responses. For the woman who is reporting or leaving an abusive relationship, she is facing a huge life transition, but our systems tend to respond in piecemeal fashion to her and her family.

> "From a cross-cultural point of view, to help the women break the isolation we need counselling programs."
>
> "The family has been fragmented, even before coming to Canada...men are staying and women are coming here. Families need to be supported as a family."

To achieve a coordinated response, the justice, immigration and human services systems must work together. Participants called on all levels of government – federal, provincial and municipal – to collaborate on a multi-system, multi-jurisdictional response.

> "Lawyers and psychologists should go into these communities to provide services, instead of the community looking for them. These pools of experts should be hired by the government to work with the communities."

These institutional systems will also have to work with the community-based agencies and women's organizations that have established close links with women in many different cultural communities across the country. But in order to be able to support the government service systems, community organizations require adequate and stable funding.

Future Research

Same-sex Partner Abuse

One aspect of the problem of abuse among immigrant and visible minority women that has received scant attention concerns same-sex partners. As one focus group participant indicated, efforts to address this unique population have been minimal.

> "To reach this particular population within the larger cultural community requires a whole special outreach effort. If there isn't a means within one's particular community to have a dialogue and discuss the issues, or to give lesbians an opportunity to come together, it doesn't happen. It's not enough to just rely on local fax trees or to send notices to organizations. Specifically doing the extra outreach is necessary to find out what support this community needs. To my knowledge, I don't think that it has happened here."

Given the serious nature and prevalence of same-sex partner abuse, participants discussed possible solutions and interventions.

> "It is about empowering the community that knows its own. It's about creating welcoming environments. The first step is to work with the service providers who are most likely to be accessing that group of women."

> "We need to assist those communities so that they have access to services that are going to be equally welcoming and we need to foster

> our resources so that the community can plan outreach or hold focus groups to discuss the unique issues."

When asked if there were programs available for gay and lesbian women who have experienced partner violence – whether they are from the mainstream culture or an immigrant or visible minority women – one participant responded by saying, "I think another piece that is generally different for lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender (LGBT) women is that we are less visible – in any culture. We are invisible unless we choose to come out." Many women in this situation feel alone and isolated in the face of non-existent social support groups and trained staff. Moreover, any services that may be in place within a mainstream organization may not be culturally sensitive.

> "At one time, there was denial even within certain service organizations and among the police. There were fears that if you talked about this problem, you were feeding homophobia. 'Look at those lesbians. They are even beating up one another.' There was such a level of fear that it was difficult to even begin to talk. We know that there has been over-policing of minority groups in the past, and issues around race, so when it concerns violence among gay and lesbian cultural communities, you have that extra level of fear."

When asked about future directions and progress for the LGBT population, one participant was hopeful about the current initiatives in place.

> "We are now in a position where there has been some work done – targeted efforts such as a police liaison committee and a regional coordinating committee … telephone answering lines, and staff training on issues of lesbian partner abuse."

Although there was some optimism regarding the progress of outreach work and staff training, the overall impression among focus group participants was that there is definitely a gap in services to address the unique issues facing immigrant and visible minority women who are abused by their same-sex partners. Participants indicated that there is, in fact, a great deal of work still to be done in this area.

> "So far, there is no overall or systematic way for approaching this."

"How much work organizations have done in this area often depends on the people involved, and whether they happen to have lesbian staff. Sometimes there are educational on-call staff, but often the expertise resides in that specific person and when they move on, the organization no longer has that expertise."

"Today, it is not primarily a lack of awareness or an unwillingness to make it a priority or to understand the complexity of these issues. My sense is that people don't know what to do."

Mainstream organizations that deal with same-sex partner abuse often do not possess the necessary tools or staff to provide meaningful support to lesbian immigrant and visible minority women who have experienced partner abuse. There was, however, discussion among focus group participants about working in collaboration with other immigrant and visible minority organizations to address the problem.

"The kind of work we are proposing to do is to assist immigrant and visible minority organizations in creating a kind of welcoming environment at their centres so that anybody who is in that situation feels comfortable enough to talk about it."

Responding to Men

Throughout the focus group discussions, there was a great deal of concern expressed about the lack of support services for immigrant and visible minority men who are perpetrators or victims of partner abuse. Many participants were vocal about the need for more support and educational outlets for such men.

"There are few services for immigrant men, and there are zero immigrant men's counselling services. What funds are available are only for women and girls…services for men are completely lacking."

"The services that exist for men are not being accessed, and they are not culturally appropriate. This is a huge gap."

"I think that it is also important to look at the situation facing immigrant and refugee men. They often have a lot of problems when

they come here and they have to learn what it means to be a man in this new culture. Their masculinity is challenged. It adds another layer, and often they can't let go. Immigrant and visible minority women certainly face problems, but they tend to get jobs quicker and learn the language faster because they see it as more of an opportunity, whereas men see it as more of a challenge. Also, many men have 'survival guilt;' they feel they shouldn't have left their country, they should have stayed and fought it out. They have all sorts of issues because being men, they are supposed to protect."

"We are responsible for educating men about life in Canada and our laws, and helping them to understand basic knowledge about how this society is structured and our social services. I don't think that we do a very good job with that. Most men are willing to learn. Unfortunately, they often don't have that information, and for some men who came here from violent societies, that is how they will see things. They don't use communications to deal with their anger, they use force, which causes major problems for the whole family."

Summing Up

Some of these issues will not be resolved quickly. However, there is much that can be done in the short term to strengthen the capacity of the systems and organizations that deal with immigrant and visible minority women who are victims of partner abuse.

Because if we don't get to work now, we will have abandoned not only today's victims, but their children as well, and they will be our future parents, workers, leaders, and thinkers. As several focus group participants noted, abuse is a learned behaviour.

Given the rising proportion of the Canadian population who are members of visible minority groups and the steady stream of immigrants to Canada every year, this is a challenge that cannot be ignored. One focus group participant expressed the hope and expectation of many of her colleagues: "The result of this project should be pressure for action."

Appendix 1: Discussion Guide used for Focus Groups

1. Can you describe the needs, fears and other emotions of women who come to you for help with the problem of partner violence?
2. What would you say are their greatest hopes?
3. What factors do you believe place immigrant, refugee or visible minority women at risk of partner abuse?
4. What factors do you believe put immigrant, refugee and visible minority men at risk of abusing their partners?
5. What are the greatest barriers that interfere with or prevent these women from leaving the abusive situations? Are there elements of structural oppression (discrimination) experienced by immigrant, refugee and visible minority women who experience abuse?
6. What are the trends of violence against immigrant, refugee and visible minority women (that is, are they increasing or decreasing? Is there more reporting / less reporting?).
7. How would you describe the attitudes of immigrant group associations/ community groups towards partner violence? What kinds of support do women receive from their ethnic community groups?
8. What are the major problems you face in trying to help these women? What resources do you need to address these problems?
9. What role should government institutions play to help address the problem of partner violence among immigrant, refugee and visible minority groups (such as roles for the courts, police, immigration, etc.)?
10. Please comment on the following as they relate to immigrant, refugee and visible minority women who experience abuse: early intervention; prosecution of cases; support and advocacy for victims; coordination between sectors.
11. What specific actions would you recommend be taken to ensure that victims receive support and access to services? As well, do you have any suggestions for proactive policies and practices aimed at preventing partner abuse?
12. What can be done to promote services that are responsive to the needs of immigrant and visible minority women who experience abuse?
13. Are there any other related issues you would like to address?

Appendix 2: Organizations Participating in Focus Groups, by City

Halifax:

- New Start Counselling
- Metropolitan Immigrant Settlement Association (MISA)
- IWK Health Centre
- Avalon Sexual Assault Centre
- North End Community Health Centre
- Coverdale Centre
- Halifax Regional Police, Victim Services
- Halifax Immigrant Learning Centre
- YMCA Newcomers Program
- YWCA Halifax
- Nova Scotia Hospital
- Bryony House
- Metro Regional Housing Authority

Montreal:

- Ministère des relations avec les citoyens et immigration (Montréal)
- Le Refuge pour les femmes de l'Ouest de l'île
- Centre d'études et de développement interculturel (CEDI)
- Service d'Aide aux Neo-Quebecois et Immigrants (SANQI)
- Mouvement Fraternité Multi-Éthnique Inc.
- Centre PROMIS, organisme d'aide aux refugiés et aux immigrants
- Barrow Institute of Community Leadership
- South Asian Women's Community Centre
- Alliance of South Asian Communities
- Immigrant Workers' Centre
- Association des femmes Filipina de Quebec/ Filipina Women's Association of Quebec (PINAY)
- Minority Rights Association of Greater Chateauguay

Ottawa:

- Women's Place/ Place aux Femmes
- Carlington Community Education Health Services
- Family Services/ Services à la Famille d'Ottawa
- Interval House of Ottawa-Carleton
- Elizabeth Fry Society of Ottawa

Toronto:

- OASIS Centre des Femmes
- Japanese Social Services
- North York Women's Centre
- Tamil Eelam Society of Canada
- Education Wife Assault
- Eritrean Canadian Community of Metropolitan Toronto
- Korean Canadian Women's Association

Winnipeg:

- Centre for War Affected Families
- Women in Second Stage Housing
- Immigrant Women's Counselling Services
- Hope Centre Health Care
- Sexuality Education Resource Centre (SERC)
- International Centre
- The Family Centre

Calgary:

- Jewish Family Service of Calgary
- YWCA Family Violence Prevention Centre & Sheriff King Home
- Calgary Mennonite Centre for Newcomers
- Awotaan Native Women's Shelter
- Sunrise Community Link Resource Centre
- Home Front
- Discovery House Family Violence Prevention Society
- Elizabeth Fry Society of Calgary

Vancouver:

- Multilingual Orientation Services Association for Immigrant Communities (MOSAIC)
- South Asian Women's Centre
- Vancouver Custody and Access Support and Advocacy Association (VCASAA)
- Vancouver & Lower Mainland Multicultural Family Services Society
- West Coast Domestic Workers Association

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	•	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Information Services	•	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	•	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	•	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	•	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Advertising	•	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	•	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	•	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Other	•	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	•	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	•	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
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Nowhere to Turn?

Voices of Frontline Workers

Immigrant and visible minority women in Canada who experience violence in their relationships can find themselves between a rock and a hard place. But as bad as the abuse may be, they face yet another set of challenges trying to deal with the social service systems and judicial structures that are supposed to help them.

This report presents highlights from focus group discussions held with frontline workers in seven cities during the fall of 2002. Representatives came from over 60 different organizations which provide a variety of services to immigrant and visible minority clients – such as emergency and transitional housing for victims of violence, immigrant and refugee settlement services, support services in the justice system, community health services, counselling, public education, training, information, advocacy, and other community based services.

Most of the focus group participants were themselves immigrants to Canada and members of visible minority groups, but they were not a homogeneous group. Everyone brought a unique perspective, based on their own experiences, the organization in which they worked, and their linguistic and cultural community. That being said, however, there was considerable consensus across the country on the major issues, needs, barriers and solutions to this problem.

Additional copies of this report as well as other documents from this project, including the *Final Report* and *Forum Proceedings*, can be downloaded free of charge from the CCSD's website at www.ccsd.ca.

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The CCSD gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Department of Justice through the Voluntary Sector Initiative (VSI) in producing this report.

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